# The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955: The Targeting of the Greek Orthodox Community

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The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 was a violent and orchestrated attack on the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul, marking one of the darkest moments in modern Turkish history. Over two days, mobs systematically targeted Greek homes, businesses, churches, and cemeteries, resulting in widespread destruction, economic ruin, and deep psychological trauma for thousands of victims. The violence, fueled by nationalist propaganda and state complicity, was triggered by false reports of a bombing at the birthplace of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Thessaloniki, Greece. The pogrom not only decimated the Greek Orthodox population in Istanbul but also left lasting scars on Greek-Turkish relations. Despite promises of protection under the Treaty of Lausanne, the Turkish state's failure to prevent or respond to the attacks highlighted the vulnerability of minorities in a climate of rising nationalism. Today, the pogrom stands as a stark reminder of the dangers of unchecked government actions, propaganda, and ethnic scapegoating, underscoring the need for historical acknowledgment, reconciliation, and education to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

Keywords: Istanbul Pogrom, 1955, Greek Orthodox community, ethnic violence, nationalism, Turkey, Greek-Turkish relations, ethnic cleansing, Treaty of Lausanne, minority rights, propaganda, Atatürk, Thessaloniki, state complicity, reconciliation, historical acknowledgment, ethnic tensions, human rights abuses, religious persecution.

## Introduction

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 stands as one of the most devastating attacks on the Greek Orthodox community in modern Turkish history. On the nights of September 6th and 7th, a well-coordinated mob rampaged through the streets of Istanbul, targeting the homes, businesses, churches, and cemeteries of the Greek Orthodox minority. This violent outburst, fueled by deep-seated ethnic tensions and nationalist fervor, resulted in widespread destruction, assaults, and even deaths. It was not just a spontaneous expression of anger but a calculated act of ethnic cleansing aimed at eliminating the Greek Orthodox presence in the city—a presence that had been integral to Istanbul's identity for centuries.

The pogrom was triggered by false reports that Atatürk's house in Thessaloniki, Greece, had been bombed. Although these reports were later proven to be fabricated, they were used as a pretext to incite anti-Greek sentiment among the Turkish populace. Mobs, largely composed of people transported from rural areas, descended upon the Greek neighborhoods of Istanbul with a systematic and premeditated intent to destroy. The violence was not confined to property damage; numerous Greek Orthodox individuals were subjected to brutal physical assaults, and several were killed. This targeted attack against the Greek Orthodox community was a severe violation of their rights as Turkish citizens and breached international agreements, most notably the Treaty of Lausanne, which guaranteed protections for minorities in Turkey.

The significance of the Istanbul Pogrom extends far beyond the immediate destruction it caused. It marked a turning point in the decline of the Greek Orthodox population in Turkey, reducing it to a shadow of its former self. The event also highlighted the fragility of minority rights in the face of rising nationalism and state-sponsored propaganda. The pogrom exposed the dangerous consequences of using ethnic and religious minorities as scapegoats for broader political and economic issues, a pattern that has repeated itself in various forms throughout history.

Furthermore, the Istanbul Pogrom serves as a stark reminder of the human cost of ethnic hatred and the failure of international communities to protect vulnerable populations. The deliberate targeting of the Greek Orthodox community was not just an attack on individuals but an assault on a rich cultural

and historical legacy that had been intertwined with Istanbul for millennia. Today, the pogrom remains a painful memory for those who lived through it and a cautionary tale of the dire consequences when the principles of tolerance, coexistence, and respect for minority rights are abandoned in favor of divisive nationalism and political expediency.

## Historical Background

The Greek Orthodox community has been an integral part of Istanbul's cultural and economic landscape for centuries. Dating back to the Byzantine Empire, when the city was known as Constantinople, the Greeks were central to the city's identity as a hub of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and a vibrant center of trade, culture, and political power. Even after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Greek Orthodox community retained a significant role in the city. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the spiritual center of the Eastern Orthodox Church, remained in Istanbul, symbolizing the enduring presence of Greek Orthodoxy in the region. The community contributed significantly to the economic life of the city through commerce, craftsmanship, and various professional fields, becoming a crucial part of Istanbul's multicultural fabric.

By the early 20th century, however, the socio-political climate for minorities in Turkey began to shift dramatically. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent rise of the modern Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk marked a period of intense nationalism and efforts to create a homogenous Turkish state. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, was a crucial document in this context, as it established the borders of modern Turkey and set out specific protections for non-Muslim minorities, including the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish communities. Articles 38-44 of the treaty explicitly guaranteed the rights of these minorities, promising freedom of religion, equality before the law, and protection of their cultural institutions.

Despite these assurances, the implementation of the treaty's provisions was often inconsistent, and minorities frequently faced discrimination, economic marginalization, and social exclusion. The Greek Orthodox community, once vibrant and thriving, began to feel increasingly alienated in a nation that was prioritizing Turkish identity above all else. The situation was further complicated

by geopolitical tensions between Greece and Turkey, particularly concerning the status of the Greek Orthodox population in Istanbul and the Turkish Muslim population in Western Thrace, Greece.

The post-World War II era saw these tensions intensify, particularly over the issue of Cyprus. Cyprus, with its mixed Greek and Turkish population, became a focal point of nationalist fervor in both countries. The Greek Cypriots' push for Enosis (union with Greece) was met with fierce resistance from Turkey, which advocated for partitioning the island to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority. This dispute fueled nationalist sentiments on both sides, and anti-Greek propaganda became a tool used by the Turkish government to rally domestic support. The Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul, despite being a small and shrinking minority, was caught in the crossfire of this larger geopolitical struggle.

As nationalist rhetoric escalated, the Greek Orthodox population in Turkey became increasingly vulnerable. The Turkish state's policies, often influenced by broader geopolitical conflicts, contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion and hostility towards the Greek Orthodox community. Economic policies such as the Wealth Tax of 1942, which disproportionately targeted non-Muslim minorities, and various other measures aimed at Turkification, further marginalized Greeks, Armenians, and Jews economically and socially.

By the 1950s, the stage was set for the tragic events of the Istanbul Pogrom. The longstanding presence of the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul, once a symbol of the city's cosmopolitan heritage, was increasingly seen as a liability in a climate of rising nationalism and international tensions. The pogrom was not just a spontaneous outbreak of violence but the culmination of years of state-sanctioned discrimination, geopolitical conflict, and a deliberate campaign to reshape the demographic and cultural landscape of Istanbul.

## Catalysts Leading to the Pogrom

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 did not occur in isolation but was the result of a complex interplay of political, social, and economic factors in 1950s Turkey. During this period, Turkey was experiencing significant internal and external pressures that contributed to a rising wave of nationalism and xenophobia. The

country was struggling with economic instability, which included inflation, unemployment, and a widening gap between the urban elite and the rural poor. These issues created fertile ground for nationalist rhetoric, which the Turkish government used to deflect public discontent away from domestic problems and towards perceived external and internal enemies, including the Greek Orthodox community.

The 1950s also saw Turkey navigating its role in the Cold War. As a NATO member since 1952, Turkey aligned itself closely with Western powers, including the United States. This alignment, however, brought with it both opportunities and challenges. Economic aid from the West helped modernize certain sectors, but the benefits were unevenly distributed, and the economic woes of the average citizen remained largely unaddressed. In this environment, the government of Prime Minister Adnan Menderes found itself increasingly relying on nationalism and anti-communism to maintain public support, often at the expense of minority communities, who were depicted as disloyal or aligned with foreign interests.

The immediate catalyst for the pogrom was a fake news incident that exploited these simmering tensions. On September 5, 1955, Turkish newspapers, particularly the state-aligned press, reported that the house where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, had been bombed by Greek nationalists. This report was quickly proven false, as it was later revealed that the bombing was orchestrated by a Turkish agent as a pretext to incite anti-Greek sentiment. However, the damage was done. The news spread rapidly, stoking public outrage and inflaming nationalist fervor. The timing of the incident was particularly volatile, coinciding with heightened tensions over Cyprus, where the struggle between Greek Cypriots seeking union with Greece and Turkish Cypriots wanting partition was at a boiling point.

The role of the Turkish state and media propaganda in inflaming public anger cannot be understated. The government-controlled press exaggerated the Thessaloniki incident, presenting it as a deliberate attack on Turkish national pride and Atatürk's legacy. Headlines were sensational and inflammatory, designed to provoke a visceral response from the Turkish populace. State officials did little to quell the rising tide of anger; in fact, there is evidence to suggest that the pogrom was premeditated with state involvement. Buses and trucks transported mobs

into the Greek neighborhoods of Istanbul, carrying tools and materials used to destroy properties systematically. Eyewitness accounts and later investigations pointed to the presence of organized groups who were well-prepared for the destruction that unfolded.

This media-driven narrative painted the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul as a fifth column—untrustworthy and unpatriotic—a dangerous other within the nation. Anti-Greek propaganda portrayed Greeks as disloyal citizens conspiring with Greece to undermine Turkish sovereignty, particularly in the context of the Cyprus dispute. Such rhetoric served to dehumanize the Greek Orthodox minority, making the subsequent violence against them appear as a justified act of national defense rather than a criminal and racist attack.

The toxic combination of economic dissatisfaction, nationalist fervor, and deliberate state-sponsored incitement created a perfect storm that culminated in the pogrom. The government's use of propaganda to manipulate public sentiment against a vulnerable minority highlights the dangerous power of state narratives in shaping societal attitudes and behaviors. For the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul, the pogrom was the tragic and violent manifestation of years of discrimination, scapegoating, and state neglect. The incident serves as a chilling reminder of how quickly nationalism, fueled by misinformation and state complicity, can lead to widespread violence and the breakdown of societal norms that protect minority communities.

**The Pogrom Unfolds: A Night of Violence**

The Istanbul Pogrom of September 6-7, 1955, was a meticulously organized and brutally executed assault on the Greek Orthodox community. The violence erupted in the evening of September 6th and continued into the early hours of September 7th, leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. Mobs of tens of thousands, incited by propaganda and transported into the city by buses and trucks, descended on Greek neighborhoods, wreaking havoc on homes, businesses, churches, and cemeteries. The attack was not random; it was premeditated and systematically carried out, with particular focus on destroying the cultural and economic lifelines of the Greek Orthodox community.

**Timeline of Events**

The pogrom began at approximately 5:00 PM on September 6, 1955, just hours after the false news of the bombing of Atatürk's house in Thessaloniki had been widely disseminated. As darkness fell, mobs started gathering in key areas of Istanbul, particularly around the Beyoğlu district, known for its Greek population. The crowd, armed with sledgehammers, clubs, iron bars, and incendiary devices, systematically moved through the streets, targeting properties identified as Greek. Some attackers were reported to have been given lists of Greek-owned properties, highlighting the organized nature of the violence.

The initial targets were Greek businesses. Shops were broken into, looted, and destroyed; windows were smashed, and goods were either stolen or thrown into the streets. The destruction was indiscriminate and often senseless—stores that had been built and run by families for generations were reduced to rubble within minutes. Not only were Greek businesses attacked, but Armenian and Jewish properties were also caught in the crossfire, highlighting the broader xenophobic sentiment underpinning the violence.

As the night progressed, the violence escalated. Mobs turned their fury towards Greek Orthodox homes, which were vandalized, looted, and in many cases, set on fire. Families were terrorized as attackers broke into their homes, destroying furniture, smashing windows, and stealing personal belongings. Many Greek Orthodox residents, fearing for their lives, hid in basements or fled to the homes of sympathetic neighbors. However, the mobs were relentless; those who resisted were often beaten, and several people were killed or severely injured in the chaos. Women were particularly vulnerable; there were reports of sexual assaults and other brutal acts of violence committed against Greek Orthodox women.

Churches, as symbols of the Greek Orthodox faith, were among the primary targets. Over 70 churches were attacked, looted, and desecrated during the pogrom. Sacred icons were smashed, religious artifacts were stolen or destroyed, and altars were set on fire. In some instances, mobs defiled holy spaces by dragging religious objects into the streets and publicly burning them. The Ecumenical Patriarchate, the spiritual center of Orthodox Christianity, was also targeted, with parts of its building damaged and ransacked. Cemeteries were not spared; graves were desecrated, and tombstones were shattered, showing a

deep-seated hatred and desire to erase the community's presence from the city entirely.

**Impact on Individuals and Families**

For those caught in the violence, the night was one of sheer terror and helplessness. Firsthand accounts describe the overwhelming sense of fear and shock as Greek Orthodox families watched their lives being torn apart. Many survivors recall the horror of seeing their homes and businesses destroyed before their eyes while feeling powerless to intervene. There are accounts of elderly people being dragged out of their homes and beaten, and of young children witnessing the destruction of everything their families had built over generations. For many, the psychological scars of that night would last a lifetime, marked by trauma, loss, and the forced realization that their city, which they had long called home, had turned against them.

One poignant testimony came from a Greek shop owner who described how his family's life savings, invested in his store, were wiped out in a matter of minutes. "We were hiding inside, praying they wouldn't find us," he recalled. "When they left, everything was gone—our money, our goods, our dreams. We were left with nothing but the clothes on our backs." Another survivor, a woman whose church was destroyed, recounted, "The place where we were baptized, married, and prayed was desecrated. It felt like our souls were violated."

Amidst the chaos, there were also stories of solidarity and bravery from Turkish neighbors who risked their own safety to shelter Greek families or hide valuable items from the mobs. However, these acts of kindness were the exception in a night dominated by fear, hatred, and violence. The pogrom left the Greek Orthodox community shattered, not just economically but emotionally and spiritually, as the reality of being targeted in their own city set in.

By the time the violence subsided in the early hours of September 7th, an estimated 4,000-5,000 properties had been destroyed. The economic damage was staggering, with losses running into millions of dollars, a sum impossible for most to recover from. The Greek Orthodox community, already diminished by decades of discrimination, was dealt a devastating blow that accelerated their exodus from Istanbul. What remained was a profound sense of betrayal, loss, and

a deep scar on the collective memory of the city's once-thriving Greek Orthodox minority.

## Immediate Aftermath and Consequences

The aftermath of the Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 was devastating for the Greek Orthodox community, leaving behind not just a scene of physical destruction but also a profound sense of loss, fear, and alienation. The immediate toll was staggering, with significant loss of life, severe economic devastation, and lasting psychological trauma that would haunt the survivors for years. The impact of the pogrom went far beyond the night of violence, setting in motion a series of consequences that drastically altered the demographic and cultural landscape of Istanbul.

### The Toll on the Greek Orthodox Community: Loss of Life, Economic Devastation, and Psychological Trauma

While the exact number of fatalities during the pogrom remains unclear, eyewitness accounts and subsequent reports confirmed that several people were killed, and many more were injured. Some victims were elderly individuals who could not escape the violence, while others were brutally beaten or assaulted by the mobs. For many survivors, the physical injuries were compounded by deep psychological scars. The trauma of witnessing the destruction of homes, businesses, churches, and cemeteries—places that held personal and communal significance—left an indelible mark on the Greek Orthodox community.

The economic toll was catastrophic. Thousands of businesses were looted, vandalized, or completely destroyed. Greek shop owners, many of whom had spent their entire lives building their businesses, found themselves bankrupt overnight. Homes were ransacked, personal belongings stolen, and savings lost. The financial losses were estimated in the millions of dollars, a sum that was impossible for most families to recover. Insurance companies refused to cover the damages, citing "civil unrest" clauses, leaving the victims with no compensation for their losses. The economic ruin forced many Greek Orthodox families into poverty, stripping them of their means of livelihood and security.

The psychological impact of the pogrom was profound. For many Greek Orthodox families, the violence shattered their sense of safety and belonging in Istanbul. The emotional trauma of being targeted, the terror of hiding from mobs, and the helplessness of watching their community be torn apart led to widespread fear and anxiety. Many survivors reported feelings of deep betrayal; they had lived alongside their Turkish neighbors for generations, only to be suddenly and violently turned upon. This sense of betrayal extended to the Turkish government, whose complicity or outright encouragement of the violence was a bitter reminder of their precarious position within Turkish society.

**Mass Exodus of the Greek Orthodox Population from Istanbul**

The immediate and most visible consequence of the pogrom was a mass exodus of the Greek Orthodox population from Istanbul. Before the pogrom, the Greek Orthodox community had already been shrinking due to years of discrimination and economic hardship. However, the scale and brutality of the pogrom accelerated this decline dramatically. Many Greek Orthodox families, traumatized by the violence and fearful of future attacks, made the difficult decision to leave their homes, often fleeing to Greece or other countries where they hoped to find safety and rebuild their lives.

This mass exodus drastically altered the demographic landscape of Istanbul. Once a vibrant and integral part of the city's cultural mosaic, the Greek Orthodox community dwindled to a fraction of its former size. By the 1960s, only a few thousand Greeks remained in Istanbul, compared to tens of thousands before the pogrom. This demographic shift marked the near-complete erasure of a community that had been a cornerstone of Istanbul's identity for centuries. Churches, schools, and other community institutions struggled to survive with the reduced population, and many eventually closed, leaving behind empty buildings as silent witnesses to a once-thriving culture.

**Broader Implications for Armenian and Jewish Minorities**

While the Greek Orthodox community was the primary target of the pogrom, the violence also had broader implications for other minority groups, particularly the Armenian and Jewish communities in Istanbul. Although the pogrom was orchestrated against Greeks, the chaos and xenophobic sentiment of the night spilled over to affect other non-Muslim minorities. Armenian and Jewish-owned

businesses and homes were also attacked, and members of these communities faced similar threats and assaults. The shared experience of violence and the pervasive atmosphere of fear underscored the vulnerability of all non-Muslim minorities in Turkey during this period.

For the Armenian community, the pogrom was a painful reminder of their precarious status in Turkey, compounded by the historical trauma of the Armenian Genocide. Armenian properties were looted and destroyed, and many Armenians were left questioning their place in Turkish society. The Jewish community, too, faced attacks on their businesses and homes. Although the violence against Armenians and Jews was not as extensive as that against the Greeks, it sent a clear message that these communities were not safe and could easily become targets of nationalist fervor.

The pogrom reinforced the perception among all minority communities that they were outsiders in their own country, subject to sudden and unprovoked attacks fueled by nationalism and state complicity. The resulting climate of fear and insecurity contributed to a broader pattern of emigration among Armenian and Jewish families, further reducing the diversity of Istanbul and altering the cultural landscape of the city.

In the broader context of Turkish society, the pogrom exposed the fragility of minority rights and the dangers of state-endorsed nationalism. It underscored how quickly social cohesion could unravel when minorities are scapegoated for political gain. The legacy of the pogrom is not only a story of loss for the Greek Orthodox community but also a stark warning of the destructive power of hate, propaganda, and unchecked government actions against vulnerable populations. The events of September 6-7, 1955, remain a dark chapter in Istanbul's history, highlighting the urgent need for recognition, reconciliation, and a commitment to protecting the rights of all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious background.

**Violation of International Treaties**

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 was not only a profound humanitarian tragedy but also a blatant violation of international agreements designed to protect minority

rights, most notably the Treaty of Lausanne. Signed in 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne was a pivotal document in the establishment of modern Turkey, delineating the country's borders and setting out protections for the non-Muslim minorities within its territory. Among its key provisions, Articles 38-44 were specifically designed to safeguard the rights of these communities, including the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish populations, by guaranteeing freedom of religion, protection of property, and equal treatment under the law. The events of September 6-7, 1955, however, demonstrated the stark failure of the Turkish state to uphold these commitments, resulting in widespread and systematic abuses of minority rights.

**Analysis of Violations of the Treaty of Lausanne (Articles 38-44)**

The Treaty of Lausanne was a cornerstone agreement that aimed to establish peaceful coexistence between Turkey's diverse ethnic and religious communities in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's dissolution. Articles 38-44 of the treaty explicitly outlined the rights and protections afforded to non-Muslim minorities, emphasizing their right to live freely, practice their religion, preserve their cultural heritage, and participate equally in the economic and social life of the country.

Article 38 guaranteed full and complete protection of life and liberty to all inhabitants of Turkey without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race, or religion. It explicitly prohibited discrimination against minorities, ensuring their equal status with Muslim citizens. Article 39 further stipulated that non-Muslim minorities had the right to use their own languages in all matters, whether public or private, and to enjoy the same civil and political rights as all other Turkish citizens.

Articles 40 and 41 specifically protected the right of minorities to establish and manage their own institutions, including schools, churches, and charitable organizations. These articles underscored the importance of allowing minority communities to maintain their cultural and religious identities without interference from the state.

Most notably, Article 44 tasked Turkey with ensuring that no actions were taken that could compromise the rights guaranteed to minorities under the treaty. The Turkish government was obliged to protect minorities from any violence or

discrimination, ensuring that they were treated equally before the law and that their properties and institutions were safeguarded against attacks.

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 represented a flagrant breach of these protections. The systematic targeting of Greek Orthodox homes, businesses, churches, and cemeteries during the pogrom directly contravened the treaty's provisions guaranteeing the safety, property rights, and religious freedoms of the Greek Orthodox community. The violence was not an isolated breakdown of law and order but reflected a broader failure of the Turkish state to uphold its international obligations to protect its minority citizens.

**Failure of Turkish Authorities to Protect Greek Orthodox Citizens**

The actions—or rather, the inactions—of Turkish authorities during the pogrom are a damning indictment of the state's complicity in the violence. Despite the scale of the attacks and the clear threat to the Greek Orthodox community, there was a conspicuous absence of effective intervention by the police, military, or government officials to stop the mobs. Eyewitness reports and subsequent investigations indicated that law enforcement officers often stood by passively or even facilitated the attacks, failing to protect the victims or to arrest those responsible for the violence.

The lack of protection was not merely a matter of being overwhelmed by the scale of the violence; it was indicative of a broader policy of tacit approval, if not outright encouragement, of the pogrom. Reports suggest that many of the mobs were bussed into Istanbul from rural areas with the knowledge or assistance of government officials. Tools used for the destruction, such as sledgehammers and gasoline, were not carried by random individuals but were brought in large quantities, pointing to a premeditated operation rather than a spontaneous uprising.

Moreover, Turkish media, tightly controlled by the state, played a significant role in inciting the violence, spreading false reports about the bombing of Atatürk's house and stoking nationalist anger against the Greek Orthodox community. This propaganda created an atmosphere of hatred and legitimized the violence in the eyes of many participants. Rather than acting as a force for peace, the media became an instrument of division, directly contributing to the breaches of the treaty's obligations.

The failure of Turkish authorities to intervene during the pogrom was not only a dereliction of their domestic responsibilities but also a breach of international law. The Treaty of Lausanne required Turkey to take proactive steps to protect its minorities, a responsibility that was fundamentally ignored during the events of September 1955. The lack of accountability for the violence, the absence of compensation for the victims, and the failure to prosecute those responsible further underscored the Turkish state's disregard for its treaty obligations.

This breakdown in the rule of law and the failure to protect the Greek Orthodox community had long-lasting consequences. It sent a chilling message to all minority groups in Turkey that their rights were not guaranteed and that the state could not—or would not—protect them from nationalist aggression. The pogrom damaged Turkey's international reputation, highlighting the gap between its commitments under international law and its actions on the ground.

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 remains a stark example of how international agreements can be undermined by domestic politics and nationalist agendas. The failure of the Turkish authorities to uphold the protections enshrined in the Treaty of Lausanne not only facilitated the violence but also led to the systematic dismantling of a once-thriving minority community. It serves as a reminder of the importance of holding states accountable to their international commitments and the need for ongoing vigilance in protecting the rights of all citizens, particularly those most vulnerable to discrimination and violence.

**The Silence and Denial: Turkey's Response**

In the immediate aftermath of the Istanbul Pogrom of 1955, the Turkish government's response was characterized by a striking lack of accountability, minimal recognition of the severity of the violence, and a deliberate denial of responsibility. Despite the scale of the destruction and the clear evidence of state complicity or negligence, the Turkish authorities took little to no action to address the grievances of the victims or to hold those responsible for the violence accountable. This official silence and denial not only deepened the trauma of the Greek Orthodox community but also set a troubling precedent for the treatment of minorities in Turkey, reflecting a broader pattern of state-sponsored denial and historical revisionism.

## Lack of Accountability: Turkish Government's Minimal Recognition and Denial of Responsibility

The Turkish government's response to the pogrom was marked by a refusal to acknowledge the orchestrated nature of the violence or the state's role in failing to protect its citizens. Official statements framed the pogrom as an unfortunate but spontaneous eruption of popular anger, rather than as a coordinated attack fueled by propaganda and tacit state support. This narrative of spontaneous violence was used to deflect responsibility away from government officials and security forces who had, at the very least, failed to intervene effectively to stop the mobs.

No significant investigations were conducted into the events of September 6-7, 1955, and no high-ranking officials were held accountable for their roles in either inciting or allowing the violence to occur. The police and military, who were largely passive during the attacks, faced no consequences for their inaction. In fact, many members of the security forces were reported to have actively participated in or facilitated the pogrom, yet these actions were neither acknowledged nor punished. The lack of accountability extended to the media, which played a crucial role in spreading false reports and inflaming public sentiment; there were no repercussions for the dissemination of misinformation that directly contributed to the violence.

The Turkish state's refusal to compensate the victims for their losses further underscored its denial of responsibility. Insurance companies, under pressure from the government, largely refused to honor claims related to the damage, citing civil unrest as an exclusion. The Greek Orthodox community was left to bear the full burden of the economic devastation without any support from the state. The government's unwillingness to provide restitution or even a formal apology was a clear indication of its broader strategy to erase the event from public memory and avoid any admission of wrongdoing.

This official stance of denial was maintained for decades, with the Istanbul Pogrom rarely mentioned in Turkish history textbooks or public discourse. When referenced, it was often described in terms that minimized the violence and obscured the targeted nature of the attacks against the Greek Orthodox community. This deliberate historical amnesia served to further alienate the

survivors and their descendants, who saw their experiences ignored or misrepresented by the state that had failed them.

## International Reaction: Greece's Protests, Muted Global Response, and the Geopolitical Context

The international reaction to the Istanbul Pogrom was notably muted, reflecting the complex geopolitical context of the time. Greece, as the primary nation concerned with the welfare of the Greek Orthodox community in Turkey, lodged strong protests against the violence. The Greek government condemned the pogrom as an act of ethnic cleansing and demanded accountability and restitution for the victims. The events further strained already tense Greek-Turkish relations, which were fraught with disputes over Cyprus and other historical grievances. Greece's diplomatic efforts included appeals to the United Nations and other international bodies to investigate the attacks and hold Turkey accountable.

Despite Greece's vocal protests, the global response was largely subdued. The broader international community, including Western powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom, responded with caution, issuing mild rebukes or statements of concern but avoiding any strong condemnation of Turkey's actions. Several factors contributed to this muted response. At the height of the Cold War, Turkey was a crucial ally of the West and a member of NATO, positioned strategically on the border of the Soviet Union. Western governments were reluctant to alienate Turkey, a key player in the containment strategy against communism, and feared that strong criticism could push the country closer to the Eastern Bloc.

Moreover, many Western nations had vested economic and military interests in maintaining good relations with Turkey, including access to military bases and trade routes. The geopolitical significance of Turkey as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East further complicated the international response, as stability in the region was seen as paramount. As a result, international actors prioritized their strategic alliances over the defense of minority rights, leading to a collective failure to hold Turkey accountable for the pogrom.

The United Nations and other international organizations, while aware of the events, were largely ineffective in addressing the crisis. The lack of a coordinated international response allowed Turkey to escape any meaningful scrutiny or

consequences for the pogrom. This global silence not only emboldened the Turkish government in its denial but also signaled to other states that the international community would often turn a blind eye to human rights abuses if geopolitical interests were at stake.

The failure of the international community to respond robustly to the Istanbul Pogrom had lasting implications. It reinforced the perception among minority communities in Turkey that they were vulnerable and unprotected, not just by their own government but also by the broader international system. It also highlighted the limitations of international law and human rights conventions in the face of realpolitik and strategic considerations. For the Greek Orthodox community and other minorities who suffered during the pogrom, the lack of justice and recognition from both their own government and the world at large remains a painful legacy of the events of 1955.

Overall, the Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 serves as a stark example of how political expediency, denial, and historical revisionism can perpetuate the trauma of ethnic violence. The Turkish government's minimal acknowledgment and refusal to take responsibility, combined with the muted global response, reflect the complex dynamics that can impede justice and accountability in the aftermath of such atrocities. The silence and denial that followed the pogrom continue to cast a long shadow over Turkey's history and its relationship with its minority communities.

**Long-term Impact and Legacy**

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 left deep and enduring scars on both Greek-Turkish relations and the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul. The violence and its aftermath marked a significant turning point in the modern history of Turkey's minorities, as the once-thriving Greek Orthodox community was driven to the brink of extinction in a city that had been their home for centuries. The pogrom was not an isolated event but part of a broader pattern of ethnic cleansing that marred the 20th century, reflecting a disturbing trend of using state-sanctioned violence to reshape national identities by targeting vulnerable minority populations. Even decades later, the events of 1955 continue to resonate within the Greek Orthodox diaspora, serving as a poignant reminder of the fragility of minority rights and the devastating consequences of unchecked nationalism.

**Lasting Scars on Greek-Turkish Relations and the Ongoing Struggles of the Greek Orthodox Community in Istanbul**

The Istanbul Pogrom significantly damaged Greek-Turkish relations, exacerbating long-standing tensions between the two nations. For Greece, the pogrom was seen as a clear act of aggression and ethnic cleansing against the Greek Orthodox community, further straining diplomatic relations that were already frayed due to disputes over Cyprus and other geopolitical issues. The Greek government's protests and appeals for international intervention were largely ignored, deepening the sense of injustice and resentment. The violence not only affected bilateral relations on a diplomatic level but also fueled negative perceptions between Greeks and Turks, contributing to a legacy of mistrust that persists to this day.

For the Greek Orthodox community in Istanbul, the pogrom marked the beginning of a painful and irreversible decline. In the years following the attacks, the Greek population in Istanbul continued to dwindle as families, fearing for their safety and lacking economic opportunities, chose to emigrate. Many left behind homes, businesses, and a way of life that had defined their community for generations. Those who remained faced ongoing discrimination and economic hardship, as the Turkish state continued to pursue policies that marginalized non-Muslim minorities, including restrictive laws on property ownership and education.

The social and cultural institutions of the Greek Orthodox community, such as schools, churches, and charitable organizations, struggled to survive amid declining membership and resources. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the spiritual heart of the Greek Orthodox Church, also faced increasing pressure, with state authorities imposing restrictions that limited its autonomy and threatened its operations. The cumulative effect of these pressures was a profound sense of alienation and insecurity among the remaining Greek Orthodox population, who felt increasingly disconnected from the city that had once been their vibrant cultural and spiritual center.

The legacy of the pogrom also reverberated through Turkish society, where the violence was often minimized or erased from public memory. In Turkish history textbooks, the pogrom is rarely mentioned, and when it is, it is often portrayed as a spontaneous outburst of popular anger rather than a coordinated attack against

a minority community. This denial of the historical reality has hindered efforts at reconciliation and healing, leaving the wounds of 1955 largely unaddressed.

## The Pogrom's Role in the Larger Narrative of Ethnic Cleansing in the 20th Century

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 is part of a broader, disturbing narrative of ethnic cleansing that characterized much of the 20th century, particularly in the context of nation-building efforts that sought to create ethnically homogenous states. The pogrom's systematic targeting of the Greek Orthodox community fits within a pattern seen elsewhere in the world, where minorities were scapegoated, demonized, and violently expelled as part of broader nationalist or ideological projects.

Throughout the 20th century, similar acts of ethnic cleansing occurred in various regions, from the Armenian Genocide in the early 1900s to the expulsion of Jews from the Arab world following the establishment of Israel, and the more recent atrocities in the Balkans during the 1990s. In each case, state actors played a critical role in inciting, facilitating, or failing to prevent violence against minority groups, often as part of a broader strategy to consolidate power, deflect internal problems, or redefine national identity.

The Istanbul Pogrom shares many of the hallmarks of these tragic episodes: the use of propaganda to incite hatred, the involvement of state forces in facilitating violence, and the ultimate goal of driving out a minority community that was seen as incompatible with the dominant national ethos. The pogrom stands as a stark reminder of how quickly societal norms can break down when governments choose to weaponize ethnic and religious differences for political gain.

In Turkey, the pogrom's legacy also highlights the ongoing challenges faced by minority communities in a country that continues to struggle with issues of diversity, inclusion, and historical reckoning. The lack of accountability for the events of 1955 has hindered broader efforts to address past injustices, leaving unresolved the deeper questions of how to reconcile Turkey's complex multi-ethnic past with its modern national identity.

## Reflections on How the Events of 1955 Continue to Resonate Within the Greek Orthodox Diaspora

For the Greek Orthodox diaspora, the Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 remains a powerful symbol of loss and resilience. Many families who were forced to flee Istanbul during and after the pogrom found themselves rebuilding their lives in Greece, the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world. These communities carried with them the trauma of the pogrom, passing down stories of the violence, displacement, and cultural loss to subsequent generations. The memory of 1955 is often intertwined with broader narratives of Greek identity, reinforcing a sense of historical continuity with other moments of persecution and diaspora.

The pogrom also serves as a touchstone for discussions about minority rights, identity, and the importance of historical memory. In recent years, there have been efforts within the Greek Orthodox diaspora to preserve the legacy of Istanbul's Greek community through oral history projects, academic research, and cultural initiatives that seek to document and commemorate the community's rich heritage. These efforts reflect a desire not only to honor the past but also to educate future generations about the dangers of intolerance and the need for vigilance in defending human rights.

The Istanbul Pogrom's legacy is also felt in the ongoing struggles of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which continues to face challenges related to religious freedom and minority rights in Turkey. The Patriarchate's precarious position is a direct echo of the vulnerability experienced by the Greek Orthodox community in the wake of the pogrom, highlighting the continuing relevance of these issues in contemporary Turkish society.

Ultimately, the events of 1955 serve as a somber reminder of the fragility of minority communities in the face of state-sponsored violence and the long-lasting impact such acts can have on cultural heritage, identity, and inter-communal relations. The Istanbul Pogrom stands as both a historical tragedy and a cautionary tale about the dangers of nationalism, intolerance, and the failure of states to protect their most vulnerable citizens. Its legacy endures in the memories of those who lived through it, in the ongoing struggles of minority

communities, and in the continued call for recognition, accountability, and reconciliation.

## Conclusion

The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 remains a dark chapter in the history of Turkey, the Greek Orthodox community, and the broader narrative of ethnic relations in the 20th century. The events of that night were not merely a spontaneous outbreak of violence but a calculated assault on a vulnerable minority, fueled by nationalism, propaganda, and the failure of government institutions to uphold the principles of justice and equality. As the memory of the pogrom continues to resonate within the Greek Orthodox diaspora and among those who value the lessons of history, the need for acknowledgment, reconciliation, and education becomes ever more urgent. Understanding and confronting this painful past is not just about honoring the victims but also about forging a path toward healing and preventing such tragedies from recurring in the future.

### The Importance of Historical Acknowledgment and Reconciliation for Healing

Acknowledging the Istanbul Pogrom is a critical step toward healing the deep wounds it inflicted on the Greek Orthodox community and on Greek-Turkish relations more broadly. Historical acknowledgment involves more than just recounting the facts; it requires an honest reckoning with the past, including recognizing the suffering of the victims, admitting the failures of those in power, and taking responsibility for the impact of those actions. For decades, the pogrom has been downplayed, denied, or ignored in official Turkish narratives, leaving the survivors and their descendants without the validation that comes from having their experiences fully recognized.

Reconciliation requires a collective effort to address these historical injustices, including efforts by the Turkish state, civil society, and international actors to promote dialogue, accountability, and restoration. This could include formal apologies, reparative measures for affected families, and steps to protect the rights of remaining minority communities in Turkey. Such actions would not only honor the legacy of those who suffered but also build a foundation for improved relations and mutual understanding between Greeks and Turks. Reconciliation is

not merely about the past—it is about shaping a future where coexistence is possible, and where diverse cultural and religious identities are respected.

## The Lessons of the Istanbul Pogrom: The Dangers of Nationalism, Propaganda, and Unchecked Government Actions Against Minorities

The Istanbul Pogrom serves as a stark reminder of the dangers inherent in unchecked nationalism and state-sponsored propaganda. The violence of 1955 was not inevitable; it was the result of deliberate actions by those in power who used ethnic and religious differences to manipulate public sentiment and deflect from broader political and economic issues. The pogrom demonstrates how quickly social cohesion can unravel when minorities are scapegoated for national problems, and how dangerous it is when governments turn a blind eye—or even facilitate—acts of violence against vulnerable groups.

Propaganda played a central role in the pogrom, as the false report of the bombing of Atatürk's house in Thessaloniki was used to inflame nationalist fervor and justify the attacks on the Greek Orthodox community. This highlights the destructive power of misinformation and the importance of a free and responsible media that does not serve as a tool for incitement. The pogrom also illustrates the critical role of government institutions in either protecting or persecuting minority populations. In 1955, the Turkish state's failure to intervene—and in many cases, its active involvement in the violence—exposed the devastating consequences when state power is wielded irresponsibly against its own citizens.

These lessons are not confined to Turkey's past; they are universal. Across the world, the rise of nationalism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism continues to threaten minority communities. The Istanbul Pogrom stands as a warning of what can happen when governments abandon their duty to protect all citizens equally and when societies allow fear, hatred, and prejudice to dictate their actions.

## A Call for Remembrance and Education to Prevent Similar Tragedies in the Future

To prevent similar tragedies in the future, remembrance and education must play central roles. Remembering the Istanbul Pogrom is not about reopening old wounds but about ensuring that the lessons of the past are not forgotten.

Educational initiatives that incorporate the stories of minority communities, the historical context of ethnic violence, and the consequences of unchecked nationalism can foster greater understanding and empathy among new generations. Teaching about the pogrom in Turkish schools, publishing survivor testimonies, and supporting historical research are all ways to keep the memory alive and to ensure that such events are never repeated.

Internationally, the Istanbul Pogrom should be included in discussions about ethnic cleansing, human rights abuses, and the protection of minority communities. Recognition of such events on the global stage can help build pressure for accountability and reinforce the importance of upholding international standards of human rights. Memorials, documentaries, and cultural projects that honor the victims can serve as powerful reminders of the need for vigilance against intolerance and the importance of standing up for those who are marginalized.

Ultimately, the story of the Istanbul Pogrom is a call to action for societies everywhere. It challenges us to confront uncomfortable truths, to advocate for justice, and to ensure that the rights of all citizens are protected, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, or background. By acknowledging the past and committing to a more inclusive and just future, we can honor the memory of those who suffered and work towards a world where such acts of violence are confined to history. The Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 must be remembered not just as a tragedy but as a lesson in the enduring importance of tolerance, accountability, and the courage to stand against hate.

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These references provide a broad and comprehensive foundation for understanding the Istanbul Pogrom of 1955, its causes, impacts, and legacy within the context of Greek-Turkish relations, minority rights, and state-sponsored ethnic violence in the 20th century.

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Pogrom of 6-7 September 1955, THREAD:👇
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Today marks the 65th anniversary of the #Pogrom of #Constantinople when #Turkey launched ethnic cleansing and eliminated the #Greek #Orthodox Minority, violating Articles 38-44 of the Lausanne Treaty, only 22 years after its application.
Μετάφραση ανάρτησης

Social media.